

Great Cæsar's Ghost!

Numismagram Newsletter #19 (III/2019)

Beware the Ides of March! Ever wonder whence that phrase derives? We're all probably familiar with the assassination of Julius Caesar, which occurred on 15

March 44 B.C.E., but why is that the "*ides*?" In the Roman world, calendars worked slightly differently than how we utilize them today, in that the days of each month were not counted incrementally, such as 14th, 15th, and 16th of

March. Instead, there were three 'fixed points' for each month: the *kalends* (the first day of the month), the *nones* (the 7th or 5th day of the month, depending on if that month contained 31 days or 30), and the *ides* (similarly, the 15th or 13th day of the month). If one were referring to 1 March, it would

be "*Kalendis Martiis*," but if it were 2 March, one would count backwards inclusively from the next 'fixed point,' meaning 2 March was rendered as

"*ante diem VI Nonas Martias*" (day 6 before the *nones* of March).

Confused? Just be glad that Caesar was assassinated on a fixed point. Since

15 March was the *ides* for that month, this fateful day is much easier to remember in Latin than, for example, 16 March, which would have been "*ante diem XVII Kalendas Apriles*." It just doesn't roll off the tongue in quite the same fashion, does it? In any event, dealing with calendars and dates being reckoned in this manner is enough to make anyone a little stab-happy...



On the topic of somewhat morbid depictions in art, we have the concept of *vanitas* (vanity in Latin), a genre of art juxtaposing life and death, ultimately leaving the viewer with the feeling of life's transience. Generally encountered in the form of the still life, arrangements may contain an array symbols, such as those of wealth and opulence, along with those that are more ephemeral and mundane, and, most importantly, those which convey life and death—with death often being represented by a human skull...



In this work by Dutch artist Adriaen van Nieulandt, the aged books, jewelry, and medals evoke a sense of refinement, wisdom, and wealth, while also being antique items synonymous with the passage of time. The mundane nature of the shell and fly on the forehead of the skull also alludes to this concept. Lastly, the flowers (some of which are wilting and have lost petals), the butterfly (which itself has undergone a transformation from its caterpillar stage), and the human skull all represent various phases of life and death—ultimately tying together this entire theme in one snapshot.

Relatedly, this topic is also addressed in medallion art, such as in the example below from this month's mini upload of new material. In this fairly straightforward piece, the Belgian engraver Eugène Jean de Bremaecker chose a youthful woman to represent the concept of life, and turned to the ubiquitous skull (quite possibly meant to be her own) on the reverse. In an additional nod to life's transience, one can see this woman's journey through life, as her hair contains the faint features of a much older woman—likely her own further down the road...



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With such weighty topics, it's important to end on a much lighter note, and what better way than with a light, crisp pilsner from a local brewery? As soon as I saw this can from Ghost Town Brewing in Oakland, I knew that it would fit well into the story, so I decided to pair it with a few other pieces from this upload—namely, another Blumenbach 'three skulls' medal and three more of the popular *méreaux* from 17th century Liège. The 5.6% pilsner itself was just a bit more on the sweet side than I would like, but that was fairly well balanced by the spooky bitterness which surrounded it...



In addition to the pieces above, we have yet another Blumenbach 'three skulls' medal, this time in the seldom-encountered cast iron module, a religious-themed bronze medal featuring the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, an attractive silver issue from Germany with the skull of a deer,

and two more of the ever-popular Society of Medalists issues on the topic of 'Peace if Life/War is Death,' each of which is a different variant from the other...



(https://shoutout.wix.com/so/0dMc2BTlx/c?w=ExBTINB_UKd-bXHEXskhTuMJKWMtrT_tdRWD6c1m13U.eyJ1ljoiaHR0cDovL251bWlzbWFncmFtLmNvbS9pbmZlbnF)

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